

## Introduction

During the last several years, DOD has published numerous reports that indicate the enormous challenges facing its acquisition workforce. In its October 2000 final report, *Shaping the Civilian Acquisition Workforce of the Future*, the Acquisition 2005 Task Force highlighted two particularly alarming trends. First, it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract, retain, and develop "the best and brightest" college students for civilian acquisition positions. Second, and equally significant, approximately half of the acquisition workforce will be eligible to retire by 2005. Taken individually, these problems seem manageable. However, when considered together, these problems provide evidence that DOD is at the threshold of dire circumstances regarding its civilian force structure.

As civilian job opportunities become more technological in nature, government agencies must now compete with private industry to hire new employees from a highly competitive, tight labor market. With the larger economic incentives afforded by private companies and the myriad of personnel rules and regulations propagated by the government, it seems evident why the government is challenged to recruit exceptional talent. Faced with the twin dilemmas of a retiring workforce and a difficult recruiting environment, the Army Acquisition Corps has engineered several innovative solutions to attract talented students into its fold. One successful cooperative initiative spearheaded by the Army Acquisition Career Management Office (ACMO), the Army

*Developing Our Future Workforce . . .*

# THE ACQUISITION CAREER EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

Matthew Savare

Acquisition Executive Support Agency (AAESA), the Army Materiel Command Headquarters (HQ AMC), and the Communications-Electronics Command (CECOM) Acquisition Center is the Acquisition Career Experience (ACE) Program.

## Birth Of A Program

In February 2000, the ACMO, AAESA, HQ AMC, the CECOM Acquisition Center, and James Madison University signed a Memorandum Of Agreement (MOA) that established the foundation of the program. The MOA established ACE as a paid, 2-year academic and government joint program where college sophomores and juniors from multifunctional academic backgrounds learn the issues and challenges surrounding the development, procurement, and deployment of state-of-the-art equipment. Students partner with a university academic advisor and an Army mentor to collaborate on challenging projects. These collaborations often culminate in a senior thesis project.

The ACE Program is based on the Student Educational Employment Program (SEEP). The regulations guiding the current SEEP were pub-

lished in the *Federal Register* on Dec. 16, 1994, and were codified into the 1995 *Code of Federal Regulations*, citation 5 CFR 213.3202.

The first year group commenced in the summer of 2000 when seven students from James Madison University's Integrated Science and Technology Program and Business Program signed up to inaugurate the ACE Program. During their summer and winter breaks, these seven students worked in a variety of organizations and contributed their best efforts

to the mission and goals of the Army. Based on the students' strong performance and the positive feedback received from them and their sponsoring organizations, the ACMO decided to expand its efforts in 2001. While the ACE Program was restricted to James Madison students in the first year and placed these students in the National Capitol Region (NCR) and Fort Monmouth, NJ, the ACMO planned to increase its recruitment efforts in 2001 and market to many different schools in a variety of regions.

## Expansion

During the last several months, the ACMO has proceeded with these ambitious plans for expansion. First, the ACMO authorized and centrally funded 40 new ACE positions for 2001. Second, acquisition career managers (ACMs) from all five regions (Northeast, NCR, Central, Southern, and Western) participated in local college career fairs to broaden the scope of their recruiting efforts. Third, the ACMs used the power and cost effectiveness of the Internet to target their search for qualified applicants. Finally, several organizational leaders from Warren,

MI, and the NCR were so impressed with the program that they funded additional slots with their own local funds.

The results of these efforts were impressive. The ACMs were able to recruit the 40 centrally funded students and the additional locally funded students. More important, the students are from a wide variety of backgrounds and schools, and unlike last year's group—which was comprised of all young men—this year's group contains many young women as well. All the applicants were board-selected by the U.S. Total Army Personnel Command, which ensured that the students selected to participate in the program embodied the strong values, intellectual aptitude, willingness to learn, and commitment to excellence that the Army is seeking.

The ACMO is dedicated to constantly improving the processes and elements of the ACE Program. To learn lessons from its first year group, the ACMO solicited feedback from the initial seven ACE students. After carefully considering and analyzing the data, the ACMO made some important changes to improve the program. For example, the students resoundingly stated that their mentors were the most important aspect of the program. The ACMO listened to this feedback and tasked the regional ACMs to conduct more formal training with the mentors than they had received in the previous year. In addition, the regional ACMs also conducted a more formal orientation for the students.

To facilitate the students' learning and provide them an appreciation and understanding that what they are doing is important, the ACMs and mentors were encouraged to describe the missions and functions of DOD, the Army, and the organizations in which the students work. Without an awareness of the "big picture" or the context of their jobs, students may feel that they are

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just pushing paper. The ACMO worked diligently to avoid this misconception and instill a sense of importance and pride in the students.

When programs are expanded, there is usually a concomitant decrease in personal contact with the participants. The ACMO, aware of this potential adverse impact, took extra steps to maintain the high level of personal involvement not only with the students, but also with the mentors. During the mentor and orientation sessions, the ACMs stressed the value of continual feedback from all the stakeholders. By encouraging honest and timely communication among mentors, students, and ACMs, the ACMO hopes to make the ACE Program a more effective and worthwhile experience now and in the future.

## Conclusion

The ultimate goal of the ACE Program is to recruit students and demonstrate to them that the Army is a challenging, interesting, and rewarding organization for which to work. The program is structured to noncompetitively access ACE graduates into an Army intern program by using the Outstanding Scholar Program—provided they complete

640 hours of ACE Program work prior to graduation and accept the Army's job offer within 120 days of graduation.

All parties involved benefit from the ACE Program. First, the Army will attract and groom acquisition leaders of the future. By recruiting exceptional students during their sophomore and junior years as opposed to waiting until they graduate, the Army has a better chance of competing with private industry. Second, the students will learn the issues and challenges facing the acquisition field while simultaneously earning money and, where applicable, receiving college credit and completing their senior thesis. Finally, the participating colleges and universities will collaborate with several technologically advanced organizations, enabling the university to offer students additional career opportunities.

The ACE Program represents a cost-effective opportunity to infuse new ideas into Army programs and processes, while recruiting and training our leaders of tomorrow.

To learn more about this wonderful opportunity, contact your regional ACM. A listing of ACMs is located online at <http://dacm.rdaisa.army.mil>. A more detailed description of the ACE Program is located on the ACE home page at <http://dacm.rdaisa.army.mil/Acepage/index.htm>. This Web site was created, designed, and developed by an ACE student.

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*MATTHEW SAVARE is an ACM in the Northeast Region. He holds a master's degree in corporate and public communication from Monmouth University and a bachelor's degree in economics from Drew University. He has Corps Eligible status and is Level III certified in contracting and Level II certified in program management.*

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